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Building Back Better in Vanuatu

Vanuatu is one of the world's most hazard-prone countries, highly susceptible to earthquakes, volcanic activity, tropical cyclones, and climate change impacts such as rising sea levels. In April 2020, Tropical Cyclone Harold made landfall over northern Vanuatu, affecting more than 130,000 people, representing more than 40 percent of the country's population. Affected populations on Pentecost Island faced myriad challenges in Harold's aftermath; among the most difficult was rebuilding shelters. As in the wake of many sudden-onset disasters, availability of building materials and labor were limited. Additionally, restrictions to slow the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19), such as border closures, hindered relief actors' capacity to provide materials and staff to augment local response efforts.

With support from USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA), CARE Vanuatu assisted residents of Pentecost to rebuild shelters by employing local knowledge and construction materials. Immediately after the cyclone, community members gathered natangura palm leaves to reconstruct damaged roofs. However, coastal communities did not have enough materials available to complete repairs. CARE connected the residents with people from Tanna Island in southern Vanuatu,

who conducted trainings on how to use locally available coconut palm leaves as an alternate roofing material.

With support from USAID/BHA and other donors, CARE provided construction materials and tools to more than 1,000 households and trained 40 community members as chainsaw operators to process fallen trees into timber, further expanding local shelter material options. CARE also trained nearly 120 community members as shelter focal points, supporting efforts to rebuild using international guidelines for resilient, safe shelter construction. These shelter focal points—of whom more than 40 percent are women—are now supporting communities to rebuild after the cyclone.

“Before, we thought only men could do this work and make decisions, but today, things have changed,” explains Peter Watas, a local chief and Area Council chairman. “In the future, if a disaster strikes, now people have received training—they can help out their community.”

